
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 10-18

Wire Building 1000 Vermont Avenue, NW (Square 216, Lot 0800)

Meeting Date: November 1, 2012
Applicant: The D.C. Preservation League
Affected ANC: 2F
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

After careful consideration, the HPO recommends that the Board designate the Wire Building, 1000 Vermont Avenue, NW, a historic landmark to be entered into the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The HPO further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a positive recommendation for listing as of local significance.



Historical and Architectural Background

The Wire Building, constructed in 1949 and opened in January 1950, is a twelve-story, mid-century Modern office building located at the intersection of Vermont Avenue and K Street, NW, immediately north of and across K Street from McPherson Square. It was built by the eponymous real estate developer Preston Wire whose business offices occupied the building's second floor, and was designed by the architecture firm of Aubinoe and Edwards, with Alvin L. Aubinoe credited as the principal designer. The Wire Building is executed in a strikingly Modern idiom for its period, made so in particular by its alternating horizontal bands of ribbon windows and smooth limestone walls that turn the corner of the intersection in a sweeping curve.

The Wire Building was constructed on its site following a two-decade-long slowdown in commercial development, and preceding the next major boom in the late 1950s and 1960s. Prior

to its construction, the site was home to the Lowery House, a Second Empire-style dwelling constructed in 1875-1876 for Archibald Lowery, a notable Victorian-era real estate developer and his family. In 1899, the dwelling was converted into offices for the Department of Justice and was later taken over by a private real estate company. Unlike the other residential buildings on McPherson Square that were largely demolished during the 1920s for commercial ones that characterize the square today, the Lowery House survived on its site until it was demolished for a parking lot in 1936.

The site remained undeveloped until Preston Wire commissioned Aubinoe and Edwards in 1949. Upon its completion, the Wire Building was acclaimed, and is so recognized today, as one of the earliest, truly Modern office buildings in Washington. Articles in trade magazines at the time assert that the continuous bands of windows was “a very recent architectural motif” and that the building itself was “setting many advanced targets for modern structures to follow.”

DC Modern, a survey of the city’s Modern-era buildings conducted for the D.C. Historic Preservation Office, confirms this assertion. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Washington was a decidedly conservative city, slow to embrace a Modern design aesthetic. While “Stripped Classicism” provided a popular modern-classical hybrid in the pre-World War II years, more overtly Modern buildings (aside from some private residences) had not yet emerged on the scene. Indeed, the Longfellow Building at 1741 Rhode Island Avenue, constructed in 1940 and generally cited as the city’s *first* modern office, was somewhat of an aberration, preceding other Modern office building designs by almost a decade. Designed by William Lescaze—one of the earliest practitioners of Modern architecture in America—this building featured horizontal bands of windows and balconies for the first time in D.C. In the years immediately following the war, the architecture of the city typically expressed advancements in spatial planning and the application of emerging building technologies, which taken together, resulted in a Modern design aesthetic. This aesthetic is characterized on exteriors by horizontality, bands of windows, and absence of ornamentation. On the interior, the Modern aesthetic in office design typically meant open, “flexible” space that could be adapted to individual and changing needs, made possible by free-standing structural columns. In the case of the Wire Building, these structural supports are round-section, concrete columns set inside the outer wall of the building.

An examination of some of the most notable of these identified early Modern commercial buildings, including Hotel Dupont Circle (1948), the General Accounting Office building (1949-1951), the World Center building (1950), the Crestview apartment building (1951) and the office building at 1001 Connecticut Avenue (1952), reveals a latent conservatism *not* evident in the Wire Building (1949). For instance, the GAO and the World Center both held onto the traditional punched-window affect rather than employing avant-garde ribbon windows. The windows at 1001 Connecticut Avenue are interrupted by vertical piers at the rounded corner, implying a corner tower and giving the building a sense of verticality that is fully expunged in the Wire Building. While the corners of the Hotel Dupont Circle are glazed and more fully dematerialized, the window banding occurs in groups, rather than continuously, as does the banding in the Crestview apartments. Among the city’s early commercial buildings, the Wire Building was the first to introduce the ultra-modern feature of uninterrupted ribbon windows, validating the claim made in the January 1950 *Home Building Monthly* article that such window treatment is “a very recent architectural motif”, and relinquishing any pretense that the façade is, or need be, structural.

The Washington Post building (1951), constructed one year after the Wire Building, most closely follows the Wire in its use of continuous ribbon windows—a treatment that gives both buildings

their strong sense of horizontality. In the Wire Building, this horizontality is further strengthened by the fact that the ribbon windows are notably recessed from the limestone facing, giving the building an almost sculptural quality.

Developer Preston Wire and architect Alvin Aubinoe had not worked together prior to construction of the Wire Building. Yet, Wire and Aubinoe were both active members of the Home Builders Association and prominent players in the city's development community. Aubinoe and Edwards had been working with developer Morris Cafritz for years, and Alvin Aubinoe had, during this time, earned a reputation as one of the foremost Washington architects designing in the Art Deco style. Wire's collaboration with Aubinoe and Edwards on the Wire Building thus generated significant interest. By all accounts, the collaboration was a success as the building received unmitigated praise for its sleek Modern aesthetic, its flexible floor space, and its use of new materials and modern technology, including automatic elevators, acoustic and asphalt tiles, and fluorescent lights.

As completed, the Wire Building accommodated a Sholl's Cafeteria and other retail on the ground floor, the Wire Properties offices on the second floor, and ten more floors of professional offices. Wire's was one of the first buildings constructed in what would become a major wave of post-World War II commercial development in downtown D.C., particularly along K Street.

Evaluation

The Wire Building meets D.C. Designation Criteria D, *Architecture and Urbanism*, and E, *Artistry*, and National Register Criterion C, *Architecture*. The Wire Building is an important example of mid-century Modern architecture as the Modern design aesthetic slowly emerged in the architecturally conservative city in the post-World War II era. Based upon other mid-century Modern buildings, the Wire Building stands out as the earliest and most intact example of its kind. The Wire Building is overtly and unapologetically Modern: its continuous ribbon windows, its curved and undecorated wall surface, its flexible interior space with natural lighting, and the building's use of new and modern materials and technology, make it an excellent expression of its building type, style and period of construction. In 2009, a Section 106 report on K Street determined the Wire Building eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion C as a good example of Modernism.¹

The Wire Building also provides an important example of the work in the career of architect Alvin Aubinoe as his design aesthetic evolved with the times. Known primarily for his earlier Art Deco-inspired buildings, Aubinoe boldly embraced the Modern movement after World War II, as exemplified by the Wire Building.

The period of significance for the Wire Building is 1949—the year in which it was constructed. The building was begun in early 1949 and opened in January 1950. The Wire Building maintains a high degree of architectural integrity. Although its windows have been replaced, the continuous banding remains intact and integral to the building's design. Similarly, although the storefronts have been replaced, the present ones have been inserted into the original openings, maintaining the original granite surrounds and foundation still intact. The building still presents its “sweeping” curved wall at the intersection and with it, interiors with exceptional natural lighting and corner offices with spectacular views.

¹ Rummel, Klepper & Kahl, LLP, *Identification and Evaluation of Historic Architectural Properties: K Street Environmental Assessment*, Washington, D.C., prepared for: District Department of Transportation, August 2009.